

STUDY MATERIAL

Introduction

(MEANING OF THE TITLE & TRANSLATOR'S HOMAGE)

In Sanskrit: rajaparikatha ratnamala

In Tibetan: rgyal po la gtam bya ba rin po che'i phreng ba

In English: Precious Garland—Advice to a King

Homage to all buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Summary of the Meaning of the Title and the Translator's Homage

At the beginning, the translators or lotsawas of the *Precious Garland* cite the text's **title** in both Sanskrit and Tibetan, indicating that it is primarily intended for a king. This is followed by the **translator's homage**, directed towards buddhas and bodhisattvas, signifying that the *Precious Garland* belongs to the Sutra Collection of the Buddha's teachings and is primarily focused on the higher training in concentration or meditation.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY:

1. Why do the translators or lotsawas of the *Precious Garland* cite its title in Sanskrit at the beginning of the text?
2. Why do the translators who have translated numerous Buddhist scriptures such as the *Precious Garland* from Sanskrit to Tibetan deserve our immense appreciation?
3. Why do the translators pay homage to the buddhas and bodhisattvas at the beginning of a text they are translating to indicate that its subject matter pertains to the Sutra Collection, to the Omniscient One to indicate that it belongs to the

Vinaya Collection, or to Manjushri to indicate that it belongs to the Abhidharma Collection of the Buddha's words? Why do they not pay homage to other entities to indicate which collection a particular text belongs to?

Verse One

(NAGARJUNA'S VERSE OF HOMAGE)

1.

**I pay homage to the Omniscient One
Who is utterly free of all faults
And adorned with all good qualities,
The one friend of all sentient beings.**

I, Nagarjuna **pay homage** or bow **to the Omniscient One**, Buddha Shakyamuni, (1) **who is utterly free of**, that is, who has attained the complete and irrevocable cessation of **all** mental **faults** and limitations, having eliminated the two kinds of obstructions; (2) **who is adorned with all good** qualities, having attained perfect realizations in the form of an enlightened mind that knows everything; and (3) who therefore engages spontaneously and effortlessly in pure enlightened activities, making him **the one** truly effective spiritual **friend of all sentient beings**.

Summary of Verse One

In the first verse, Nagarjuna pays **homage to Buddha Shakyamuni**. This serves a twofold purpose: (a) it benefits the author in both the short and long term, and (b) it benefits the readers in both the short and long term.

Nagarjuna pays homage to the Buddha by extolling **three enlightened qualities**:

- (1) His perfect eliminations
- (2) His perfect realizations
- (3) His enlightened activities

The Buddha's **perfect eliminations** refer to the complete and irrevocable eradication of the two types of obstructions: (a) afflictive obstructions, which refer to mental afflictions and their seeds, and (b) cognitive obstructions, which are the imprints left by these afflictions. The obstructions are gradually eliminated on the bodhisattva path through their direct antidote—the meditative equipoise that directly realizes emptiness. This meditative mind first progressively eliminates the various levels of afflictive obstructions, with the cessation of the subtlest afflictive obstructions marking the first moment of liberation. Subsequently, the same meditative equipoise begins to gradually eradicate the different levels of the cognitive obstructions. The cessation of the subtlest cognitive obstruction signifies the first moment of buddhahood, characterized by **perfect realizations**. Perfect realizations include the Buddha's omniscience, along with all his other mental qualities, such as love, compassion, skillful means, and strength, which enable him to engage in enlightened activities to guide sentient beings toward liberation and enlightenment.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY:

1. Why are attitudes such as gratitude, faith, and inspiration conducive to study, reflection, and meditation on the *Precious Garland*?
2. What are the short- and long-term benefits for the author and the reader of Nagarjuna's verse of homage?
3. Why does Nagarjuna specifically praise the Buddhas for these three enlightened qualities: his perfect eliminations, his perfect realizations, and his enlightened activities?
4. Are there enlightened qualities that are not included in these three and if so, which are they?
5. Why do the first two enlightened qualities mainly benefit a Buddha, while the last one mainly benefits sentient beings?
6. What is the difference between the mental afflictions and the seeds of the afflictions?
7. What is difference between the seeds of the afflictions and the imprints of the afflictions?
8. What are perfect realizations and why does a Buddha attain them only once all the afflictive and cognitive obstructions have been eliminated?

9. What does it mean when it is said that Buddha Shakyamuni is the only truly effective spiritual guide or spiritual friend of sentient beings? Does this imply that there are no other beings, such as Buddha Maitreya, who can also serve as truly effective spiritual guides?

Verse Two

(NAGARJUNA'S PROMISE TO COMPOSE THE TEXT)

2.

**O King, I will explain to you the fully virtuous dharma
So that you may give rise to the dharma within yourself,
For the dharma will be accomplished
In one who is a vessel of the sacred dharma.**

O King, you who are the main disciple of the *Precious Garland*, **I**, Nagarjuna, **will explain to you the fully virtuous dharma**, which refers to the primary and secondary causes of attaining higher rebirths and the highest good, and which is virtuous at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. I will explain this **so that you may give rise to** or cultivate **the resultant dharma**—liberation and enlightenment—**within yourself**. The reason for my explanations is that you are **a suitable vessel of the sacred dharma** and **the dharma will be accomplished in one who is** such a vessel.

Summary of Verse Two

The first two lines of the second verse are Nagarjuna's **promise to compose the text**. This promise serves as a declaration of intent and commitment, ensuring the successful completion of the work. By fulfilling this promise, the author not only demonstrates his credibility and dedication but also ensures the transmission and preservation of the teachings for the benefit of others.

The first two lines also constitute **the words of purpose and relationship**, which comprise four components:

(1)

The **subject matter** of the *Precious Garland*:

- Higher rebirths (birth in the human or celestial realms)
- The highest good (liberation and enlightenment)
- The causes of these two goals (ethical discipline, renunciation, the wisdom realizing emptiness, etc.)

(2)

The **immediate purpose** of the *Precious Garland*:

- Understanding or realizing the subject matter of the *Precious Garland*.
- Practicing the causes of higher rebirths and attaining rebirths in the human or celestial realms

(3)

The **ultimate purpose** of the *Precious Garland*:

- Attaining the highest good by meditating on the previously understood subject matter, once a higher rebirth has been attained.

(4)

The **relationship** between the first three components:

- The ultimate purpose relates to or depends on the immediate purpose
- The immediate purpose related to or depends on the subject matter

Nagarjuna starts the first two lines of the second verse with the words “**O king**”, indicating that Nagarjuna is directly addressing a king, which carries many advantages.

In both lines, Nagarjuna mentions the dharma. The dharma in the first line refers to the causes of higher rebirths and the highest good, while the dharma in the second line refers to the results: higher rebirths and the highest good themselves.

The causes are considered “**fully virtuous**” because they are virtuous at each stage of practice: in the beginning, when ethical discipline leads to higher rebirths; in the middle, when the wisdom realizing emptiness takes practitioners towards liberation; and at the end, when the wisdom realizing emptiness, conjoined with bodhicitta, leads to enlightenment.

The last two lines of the third verse demonstrate the reason why Nagarjuna taught the *Precious Garland* to the king, implying that the king is **a suitable vessel for the dharma** and for this text. Such a vessel will accomplish the dharma by attaining high realizations and profound insights through the study, reflection, and meditation on the *Precious Garland*, and according to Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas* must have three qualities: they must be (1) **unprejudiced**, (2) **intelligent** and genuinely (3) **interested** in the dharma. Chandrakirti adds two further qualities: they must have (4) **respect** for and (5) **reliance** on the dharma and the qualified spiritual master who teaches it.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY:

1. Why is the promise to compose the text cited at the beginning of the *Precious Garland*?
2. Which words in the second verse indicate the 'words of purpose and relationship'?
3. What are the four components of the 'words of purpose and relationship,' and why are they indicated at the beginning of the *Precious Garland*? Why is there no fifth component?
4. How does the ultimate purpose relate to the immediate purpose, and how does the immediate purpose relate to the subject matter of the *Precious Garland*?
5. What are the advantages of teaching the *Precious Garland* to a king?
6. What do we, in the 21st century, have in common with an Indian king from almost two millennia ago?
7. How many times is the word "dharma" mentioned in the second verse, and what does each instance refer to?
8. Why is the dharma mentioned in the first line described as "fully virtuous"?
9. What does it mean to be a suitable vessel for the dharma?
10. Why does Chandrakirti add two additional qualities to those of a suitable vessel for the dharma?

Verse Three

(THE ACTUAL TEXT)

(THE SEQUENCE OF PRESENTING HIGHER REBIRTHS AND THE HIGHEST GOOD)

3.

དང་པོར་མངོན་པར་མཐོ་བའི་ཆོས། །

ཕྱིས་ནི་ངེས་པར་ལེགས་འབྱུང་བའོ། །

གང་ཕྱིར་མངོན་པར་མཐོ་ཐོབ་ནས། །

རིམ་གྱིས་ངེས་པར་ལེགས་པ་འོང་། །

First comes the dharma of higher rebirths.

Later follows the highest good.

For it is after obtaining higher rebirths,

That one proceeds gradually to the highest good.

First comes the explanation of **the dharma** of the ten virtues, etc., which are the causes **of higher rebirths**. **Later**, when these virtues have been effectively put into practice, the explanation of the perceived objects of the path to **the highest good**, such as emptiness, **follows**. **For it is** only **after obtaining** a series of **higher rebirths** in the human or celestial realms **that one proceeds gradually to the highest good**.

Summary of Verse Three

In general, the arrangement of the different Buddhist concepts, practices, and teachings in the scriptures follows a deliberate structure, usually guided by two primary principles: (1) the order of their arising and (2) the order of their cognition

The order of their arising (ontological sequence) pertains either to the sequence (a) in which they arise naturally or (b) in which they are cultivated through the practice of the dharma.

The order of their cognition (epistemological sequence) relates to the strategic and gradual presentation of Buddhist concepts, etc. according to the practitioners' capacity for understanding and implementing them.

The sequence in which higher rebirths and the highest good are taught in the *Precious Garland* is based on the order of their arising. This sequence is guided by two primary reasons:

I. **Higher rebirths serve as an existential foundation for the highest good**

Births in the human and celestial realms are crucial stepping stones towards liberation and enlightenment. These realms offer favorable conditions for mental transformation, including access to teachings and communities, intellectual capacity, and freedom from extreme suffering. As such, creating the causes for such rebirths is of paramount importance for those seeking to overcome.

II. **The causes of higher rebirths serve as a mental foundation for the causes of the highest good**

Practicing the causes of higher rebirths, such as ethical discipline, is necessary before cultivating the causes of the highest good, like renunciation and the realization of emptiness. Ethical discipline, which involves cultivating virtuous actions and avoiding harmful ones, is more accessible and provides a solid mental foundation necessary for deeper contemplative practices. This sequence is crucial because ethical discipline purifies and prepares the mind for understanding profound concepts like emptiness. Introducing the concept of emptiness prematurely, without a foundation of ethical discipline, can lead to misunderstandings and harmful actions. Therefore, it is essential to observe karma and its effects in a way that aligns with a correct understanding of emptiness, ensuring that both concepts complement each other.

The sequence of higher rebirths and the highest good is reversed when it comes to their **order of cognition**, as it is easier to realize the concept of liberation and buddhahood than to grasp the concept of rebirths in the human and celestial realms. This is because understanding these concepts involves the realization of emptiness and the workings of karma, respectively. The realization of karma is more challenging, as it is a very obscure phenomenon, whereas emptiness is only slightly obscure.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY:

1. What are the two key factors that typically determine the sequence in which the different concepts are presented in the scriptures? Could there be a another factor?
2. What are other examples of Buddhist concepts, besides those mentioned in the handout and study material, where the sequence of their presentation in the scriptures is determined by one of these two key factors (the order of arising and the order of cognition)?
3. What are the reasons why rebirths in the human or celestial realms are a conducive foundation for higher rebirths. Can you think of any additional reasons not mentioned in the handout?
4. What are the reasons why the practice of ethical discipline prepares the mind for the realization of emptiness. Can you think of any additional reasons not mentioned in the handout?
5. What are examples of evident, slightly obscure, and very obscure phenomena that are not mentioned in the handout?
6. What do we need to realize in order to understand liberation, and why does the understanding of liberation need to be preceded by the realization of emptiness?
7. What do we need to realize in order to understand buddhahood, and why does the understanding of buddhahood need to be preceded by the realization of emptiness?